

RUTHVEN'S WARD

BY FLORENCE MARRYAT.



CHAPTER V.—(CONTINUED.)

The remainder of the afternoon was spent by the girls in unpacking their boxes and choosing their dinner dresses. Margaret's was a pale blue, chosen by Mrs. Garrett, at Marshall & Snellgrove's—a charming color as contrasted with the girl's fair loveliness, but more suited for a ball than a quiet family evening. She looked very pretty, though, as Carmen, arrayed in a black dress ornamented with knots of scarlet ribbon, took her hand to lead her into the presence of her uncle, Sir Frederic was wandering without any apparent aim, up and down the long library as the girls entered it. Before he saw them Margaret had time to note the mild benevolence of his aspect, and the precision with which he was attired, even though he was only about to dine with a couple of school girls. He was a little man—straight, precise and neat as an old bachelor—with snow-white hair, delicate complexion, and pale blue eyes. Margaret was sure she would like him very much. As he caught sight of the girls he advanced to meet them; but his failing sight prevented his recognizing more than their figures until they were close to him. He embraced Carmen more punctiliously than fervently, and Margaret instinctively felt as she watched their greeting that Sir Frederic could not forget his niece stood in the place of his dead child.

Then he turned to the stranger. He had been about to salute Margaret in the same courteous manner as he had done Carmen; but as his eyes fell upon her figure he stepped backward and was silent.

"Uncle, this is Miss O'Reilly," said Carmen, in explanation.

Still Sir Frederic did not answer her, but, feeling his way backward until he reached a chair, sank down into it and passed his handkerchief in a distressed manner across his brow.

"Sir, are you ill?" exclaimed Margaret, darting forward. He waved her from him impatiently.

"Leave him alone. He'll be better in a minute," whispered Carmen in her friend's ear.

After that there was complete silence between them for the space of a few minutes, whilst the girls stood together in the window, looking awkward, and Sir Frederic bent over the table wiping his brow. Then he rose, tottering at first, and begged their pardon for his weakness.

"I am an old man, my dear child," he said, to Margaret, "and I have passed through much trouble and lost many friends. Sometimes a strange voice, or look, or expression recalls the past too vividly and upsets me. I think it was the color of your hair that brought back painful recollections to my mind. It is very beautiful," he continued, passing the glossy curls through his fingers; "so soft, and thick and heavy—just like hers—just like hers. But come," he said, a moment later, "I think dinner has been announced. Let us go in and forget this folly. I must grow accustomed to the sight of your pretty hair, my dear, so the sooner I commence the better."

He led the girls into the dining room as he spoke, and no further allusion was made to his past life. Carmen told Margaret afterward that Mrs. Webb had informed her that her aunt Florence had possessed golden hair of extraordinary length and thickness.

Margaret thought that Carmen's pert and forward manners rather grated on Sir Frederic's sensibility. He did not reprove her, but every now and then, as her voice fell upon his ear, he shuddered as if his teeth had been put on edge. As he dismissed them for the night he asked Carmen where she and her friend slept.

"We sleep together in the south room."

"Is that advisable, my dear? There are plenty of rooms on the opposite side of the corridor."

"I've always slept in it."

"I know you have, but I would have put my friend on another story, if I had been you."

"Oh, we shall do well enough; I'll take care of her," rejoined Carmen, carelessly, as she bade him good-night.

Margaret wondered why both Sir Frederic and Mrs. Webb should wish them to change their apartments; such a pretty room as it was, and so beauti-

fully sheltered by those twining creepers.

She lay awake for some time after they had retired to rest, thinking of all this.

Mrs. Webb had placed a sofa bedstead across the bottom of the large bed on which Carmen reposed, for her use, and as Margaret ensconced herself in it, she found that her eyes faced the long French windows, against the panes of which the green tendrils and many colored blossoms were keeping up such a pleasant music.

Margaret fell to sleep with her mind full of strange imaginings—now fancying that tiny elves sat upon the broad leaves of the creeper whispering to each other; now that they swung themselves down like nimble harlequins by the twisted tendrils of the vine; anon, that the half-opened roses changed into lovely faces, and bowed toward each other in all the frolic of a fairy courtship.

Carmen, with the indolent, unimaginative blood of her Spanish mother walking slowly through her veins, had never indulged in any such weird-like fantasies; she lay on her soft bed now, slumbering dreamlessly and dispassionately. But restless, agile Margaret twisted and turned, and had composed a whole romance before she could persuade the god of sleep to visit her.

How long he stayed she knew not, nor what subtle potion he had administered to change all her lovely fairy dreams to visions of the past life she so dreaded to remember.

But groans and curses and cries of pain, or so the girl imagined, mingled with her sleeping experiences, and she woke with the full sense of some coming horror on her mind. The room was wrapped in the peaceful repose in which she had seen it last; the flowers and leaves still shaded the unsheltered window; but what was that horrid face—white, flat and senseless—that was pressed close against one of the panes of glass? Was it a reflex of her uneasy dream? A remembrance only of some dreadful visage that had scowled upon her when she was a poor, trembling little outcast, wandering in fear about the London streets? Margaret could not decide; but the sight she saw inspired her with terror. With a shriek of fear she sprang from her own bed to Carmen's, and succeeded at last in arousing that sleepy young lady to a consciousness of the cause of her alarm. When she had once seen it, Carmen appeared as frightened as herself, and, rushing out into the corridor, called loudly for Webb and then for "Mr. Brown." The last appeal was the most effectual, for before the housekeeper appeared upon the scene, a respectable-looking man in dressing gown and slippers, answered the young lady's call, and inquired the reason for it. Carmen told it to him, whispering rapidly in his ear; and the next moment he had entered the room they had vacated, and Mrs. Webb appeared to lead them to another.

"What is it?" inquired Margaret, trembling. "A ghost?"

"Lor' bless the child," began the housekeeper. "How should we have ghosts at Abbotsville?"

But Carmen stopped her.

"Yes, it is a ghost! Why not speak the truth at once? Never mind, Maggie; don't shake so—we'll sleep upstairs for the future."

"You'd better come at once then," said Mrs. Webb, as sounds of scuffling and faint cries began to make themselves heard from the deserted room. "You won't go back there to-night, Miss Carmen, will you?—and you're both beginning to tremble with the fright and chill."

The girls did not sleep in the south room again during their stay at Abbotsville, and the remainder of their holidays was spent amongst the diversified pleasures of a country life.

CHAPTER VI.



Miss Margaret O'Reilly, from their care at the following midsummer. They had added—that having done their best to fit her for the society she was doubtless intended to enter, they trusted Mr. Ruthven would be as well satisfied with the culture of her mind as he could not fail to be with the graces of her person. And

Ruthven did not know what on earth to do with her.

Mrs. Garrett's accounts tallied so well with that of Miss Prism, that he could not but believe they were correct and he was he to bring home this talented young person to the little house at Kensington, and ask her to sit down stairs in the housekeeper's room?

He would have handed her over at once to the care of his friend, Mrs. Delamaine, who would have been eminently suited to prepare her for the stage; but, alas! poor Mrs. Delamaine had gone the way of all flesh whilst Margaret was at school, and Ruthven knew of no one else to whom he could entrust her.

One thing only was certain; midsummer was close at hand, and at midsummer the child must be fetched away from Blackheath and established somewhere else.

Well, Garrett had arranged everything respecting her for him before, and she must continue to do so. Hamilton Shore did certainly offer to make a journey to Pomona Villa and bring back the captive princess to Kensington, but Mrs. Garrett received his proposal with scorn.

"She hadn't been used to see young ladies trapesing about the streets with harum-scarum fellows like himself, whatever he had."

"Oh, she's a young lady now, is she?" exclaimed Hamilton in return. "I thought she was a housemaid when I last saw her."

"Well, housemaid or lady, it's all the same. Miss Margaret is a decent gal, and none such would be seen walking about with you."

"Thanks for the compliment," cried the lad gaily.

He was but a lad still, though he would have been anything but pleased to be told so. He was now nineteen, and reading steadily for his profession.

Mrs. Garrett's dismay, when Ruthven asked her if Margaret could not have her meals downstairs with her, was comical to behold.

"La, sir, do just go down and have a look at her yourself before you put such a question to me again. She mayn't be a lady born—as Mr. Addison has it—but she's grown so much like one that nobody could tell the difference."

Which speech perplexed poor Ruthven more than ever.

"Then you must fit up the back dining room for her, Garrett, and let her have her meals there until I can hear of a suitable opening for her. I never thought the girl would be so much trouble, or I would have had her educated in her own station in life."

Margaret left Blackheath with very mingled feelings. She was sorry to part with Carmen Flower and other friends, but she was much comforted by the many invitations which were liberally showered upon her.

And then she was sixteen, and a woman, at all events in her own estimation, and curiosity was powerfully prompting her in a desire to see London again under more favorable auspices.

The town was ringing at that moment with praises of Ruthven's last drama, and Margaret had read some of the notices upon it, and tried to conjure up a memory of this mysterious benefactor of hers, who had adopted and brought her up without any motive but that of his own benevolence.

It was with considerable alacrity that Margaret appeared to accompany Mrs. Garrett to Kensington. She was looking very lovely on that day. Excitement had lent an extra glow to her cheek and increased the brightness of her eye.

It so happened that Ruthven was unusually late in leaving home that afternoon—perhaps curiosity had also had a little to do with his loitering about the house—but as he stepped over the threshold, the cab, laden with luggage and containing Mrs. Garrett and her charge, drove up to the door. Ruthven went forward to assist the women to the ground. He expected to see a healthy, well-dressed and good-looking girl in Margaret O'Reilly, instead of which, a graceful, slender form, tightly attired in the prevailing mode, with a face of exquisite child-like simplicity, met his astonished view.

"Is this Peg?" he exclaimed in astonishment. "This is Miss Margaret, sir," corrected the housekeeper sharply, as she drew out her purse to settle with the cabman.

Ruthven gazed at the young girl, who was looking up with two great limpid eyes into his face, speechlessly. He thought he never before had seen such an incarnation of youthful womanhood.

The sunny, luxuriant tresses were taken captive now and piled upon the top of her head; but the open, dewy mouth, the long eyelashes, the shy, half-veiled gaze, the delicate, rose-leaf complexion—all struck him for the moment dumb. "Haden't you better take Miss Margaret in, Mr. James?" demanded Mrs. Garrett, in rather an acrid voice.

"Yes, yes; certainly. Won't you come in?" said Ruthven.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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